The Importance of the Old Testament

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I have often said that the laws given in the Old Testament—what we call "the Law"—were special commands given only to the people of Israel. As Gentiles, we are not required to observe them.

Hearing this, some may think that I disregard or even dismiss the Old Testament. But that is not the case. The Old Testament is a precious and indispensable book.

In the past, I sometimes referred to the Old Testament simply as "the Law." This was a common way of speaking among the Jews and even appears in the New Testament. Yet it is not entirely accurate. In Jewish tradition, the Old Testament is divided into four sections:

1. **The Law (Torah)** – the first five books, also called the Law of Moses.
2. **The Histories** – from Joshua through Ruth, recording Israel's national story.
3. **The Writings (Poetry and Wisdom)** – including Psalms through Song of Songs, with Proverbs and Ecclesiastes as wisdom literature.
4. **The Prophets** – Isaiah through Malachi, containing both major and minor prophets, with prophecies about Israel, history, and especially the Messiah.

When the Old Testament is broadly labeled "the Law," its legal character is emphasized. But the Old Testament is more than law—it is God's message for all humanity. In that sense, it can be called a letter from God to mankind.

Yet we must remember: the Law itself was given exclusively to Israel. My concern has been that the Church, throughout history, has often misapplied Israel's Law directly to Gentiles. That is a mistake.

Take Exodus 20:1, the introduction to the Ten Commandments. It makes clear that the commandments were given to Israel, whom God had delivered out of slavery in Egypt. These laws were the covenant terms for a people chosen and redeemed for a special mission. They were not addressed to Gentiles.

Therefore, we must not take Israel's laws and use them to condemn the Japanese—or any other Gentile people—as "sinners" for failing to keep them. Nor should we preach Israel's history as though God's special dealings with Israel apply identically to every nation. God's blessings and chastisements toward Israel were unique to their covenant.

We also must not use Israel's wars as justification for Christian nations to wage war in God's name. Tragically, Western Christendom did exactly this—invading nations, enslaving peoples, and committing inhumane acts under a false reading of Scripture.

Furthermore, we should not uncritically imitate the expressions of faith in the Old Testament. For example, many psalms cry out for revenge on enemies. These reveal genuine faith, but also human limitation. They do not reflect the perfect teaching of Christ, who commanded us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Paul also strictly forbade the spirit of revenge. Thus we must weigh the Old Testament in the light of the New.

Consider Genesis. Though included among the books of the Law, it actually records history before the giving of the Law—how God chose Israel as the vessel of salvation. Even further back, Genesis begins with the story of creation. Some insist these are scientific facts to be defended against modern science. But that is not the point. Genesis was written over three thousand years ago, reflecting the worldview of its time. The "truth" of Genesis is not scientific description but theological reality: that God is the Creator of all, the absolute and infinite One, unlike the gods of the nations.

Genesis is, in fact, God's self-introduction. In it we also learn that humans were created in God's image, wholly dependent on him, and designed to live in fellowship with him. We cannot fully comprehend God, but we can sense his presence, worship him, and live in gratitude and reverence.

Being made in God's image also means that humans instinctively know how to live with one another. Written laws are not the only guide—we also have the law written on our hearts. Traits such as love, kindness, mercy, fairness, and justice are reflections of God's nature implanted in us.

Though sin has marred human nature, this original likeness to God is not destroyed. It remains, however faintly, in every person. Among the Japanese, I believe this likeness

remains especially strong. Shinto, at its purest, recognizes a noble, invisible God who cannot be seen or described, only revered with awe and gratitude. This is strikingly close to the biblical sense of God.

Thus, even in a land where Christians are few, Japanese society often reflects values that align with Scripture. Many Japanese deeply admire the life and teachings of Christ, even if they feel uneasy with the religion called Christianity. Sadly, this unease often arises from the Church' s misuse of the Old Testament—imposing Israel' s Law directly on Gentiles and condemning them unjustly.

The Old Testament is indeed a treasure. It reveals humanity' s true calling, the seriousness of sin, God' s plan of salvation, and the election of Israel as his instrument. To read it rightly is essential for Christian faith. But to misuse it is to distort the gospel and drive people away from Christ.